

Montreal Architectural Review

Book Review 2: Vidler, Anthony. *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Architecture and Utopia in the Era of the French Revolution*

Basel: Birkhäuser, 2021 (2nd & expanded edition)

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For over thirty years, Anthony Vidler's *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the End of the Ancien Régime* (MIT Press, 1990) has remained the definitive historical account and interpretation of the late eighteenth-century French architect's career, work, and theory in English, standing alongside those of Michel Gallet and Daniel Rabreau in French. Ledoux (1736-1806) was one of most prolific architects in France in the years leading up to the French Revolution. His most prominent built works include the Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans (1778) in Franche-Comté in Eastern France, the Theatre of Besançon (1784), and the *Ferme générale*'s ill-fated wall and tax-collection *barrières* encircling Paris (1785-89). Ledoux is also well known for his 1804 treatise *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation* ("Architecture in Relation to Art, Mores and Legislation") in which he elaborated an idealized, if not utopian, architectural and social vision for a model factory town in the ideal city of Chaux, centered on the Royal Saltworks. Vidler's distinct contribution was to comprehensively situate Ledoux's architectural practice, work, and theory within the complexity of his social, cultural, intellectual, and professional

milieux in late eighteenth-century France against the predominant view of him in the 1960s as a ‘visionary,’ utopian and even ‘revolutionary’ figure, and particularly against Emil Kaufmann’s earlier interpretation of Ledoux as formally and conceptually anticipating the modernism of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. Rather than a utopian revolutionary, Vidler revealed Ledoux to be a proto-modern professional architect deeply ensconced within the *ancien régime*, whose practice and theory comprised both practical reform and social idealism, rational planning, and poetic expression, and manifested at all registers a much more complex interrelation between real and ideal than could be understood within a categorically utopian framework.

Fifteen years after publishing *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux*, Vidler revised a condensed version of this study originally published in French by Hazan in 1987 into a new edition entitled *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Utopia in the Era of the French Revolution*. Published by Birkhäuser in 2005 in both English and German language editions, the book was intended for a more general and professional audience. While this new volume included additional research on how Ledoux was likely influenced by Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) in composing the highly stylized prose of *L’Architecture*, it overwhelmingly reprised the 1990 monograph in summary, yet detailed, form, supplemented by images of Ledoux’s plates from *L’Architecture* as well as colour photographs of the Royal Saltworks and other extant works. The abridged edition provided Vidler the opportunity to make the case further that seeing Ledoux through a ‘visionary’ or utopian lens obscured the complexity of his actual practice. He argued that Ledoux was in most ways a rather typical late-Enlightenment architect whose ideals were “the shared commonplaces of a generation responsive to Diderot and his collaborators, [drawn] readily if eclectically from the theories of the philosophes, agronomists, economists, and writers committed to the reform of traditional institutions and social practices.” As signaled by the title, however, the question of Ledoux’s idealism, and of the ideality of his work as broadly, if not categorically, utopian, persisted throughout the new edition in a complex interplay with very real historical concerns and conditions which were now more sharply presented in view of the impending French Revolution.

This 2005 volume has now been revised and expanded into a second edition published by Birkhäuser in 2021, again both in English and in German. The book includes a new introduction and concluding chapter, additional material both new and from the 1990 monograph, as well as minor revisions and updates throughout. There are now separate indexes for persons and for locations and projects, and an updated chronology and bibliography. Otherwise, the volume generally reiterates the 2005 edition while reorganizing the material into two sections thematically and chronologically. The first, entitled “A Career Open to Talent, 1760-1789,” examines Ledoux’s practice up until the French Revolution in relation to key aspects of his social and architectural idealism; the second, “From New Town to Utopia, 1776-1806,” situates his ideal city of Chaux and its residences, workshops, and institutions in turn with regard to how they were conceived within contemporary economic, agricultural and social contexts.

Part I opens by surveying Ledoux's formation and early career in Paris as a protégé of Madame du Barry, mistress to Louis XV, as well as in the *Service des eaux et forêts* ahead of his appointment as Commissioner of Saltworks for the eastern region of France including Franche-Comté in 1771. Vidler then focuses on Ledoux's commission for the Royal Saltworks beginning in 1773 in which he took the realities of salt production within the Royal administration's broader agenda for industrial reform and regional development as the basis for developing his social, moral and aesthetic programs for architecture. Organizing the factory complex in a semi-circle with the director's building at the center, Ledoux implemented the technical rationality of the *Encyclopédie* within a veritable "theatre of production," according to Vidler, dramatizing the productive process within a simplified geometrical language of architectural character imbued with qualities of the Burkean sublime. Vidler argues that as a type and metaphor, the theatre perfectly situated Ledoux's ambitions to socialize the worker population within a "pre-panoptical symbolism of surveillance and proto-Rousseauesque model of community." He then shows how, to various degrees, Ledoux extended the sublime idealized physiognomic character of the Saltworks to his other major public commissions such as the Theatre of Besançon, the unrealized Palace of Justice and prison of Aix-en-Provence (1784-85), and the ruinous Propylaea of Paris, or fiscal wall and tollgates of the *Ferme générale*, which are each discussed in their own chapters.

In Part II, Vidler argues that Ledoux's ideal city of Chaux, presented in *L'Architecture* and envisioned from the early 1780s as an imaginary extension of the Saltworks, was far more responsive to pragmatic motivations than had generally been recognized. He shows that Ledoux likely conceived of a town extending around the factory early on in the design process and locates his intentions wholly within the administration's physiocratic goals for industrial, commercial, and agricultural development in the region. Accordingly, Vidler notes that Ledoux's vision of Chaux as a centre of regional networks of canals and roads was much "less utopian than it was an application of common engineering wisdom joined to Turgot's doctrine of progress." Likewise, Vidler describes how Ledoux's idealized rural houses and agricultural projects, such as the model agricultural village developed for the Marquis de Montesquiou at his estate of Mauperthuis in the mid-1780s, were direct responses to the practical reforms advocated by the agronomist movement in France. Finally, Vidler examines how Ledoux's social idealism and architectural symbology drew overwhelmingly from Freemasonry as one of the most important milieux of late eighteenth-century sociability, and shows how he adopted the lodge as an ideal architectural type for the invented social and moral institutions of Chaux.

A final chapter traces Ledoux's fate after his suspension from the *barrières* works and public fall from grace on the eve of the French Revolution, through his imprisonment under the Terror and narrow escape from execution, and into the last years of his life spent preparing the publication of *L'Architecture*. A new concluding chapter surveys Ledoux's reception by the public, architects, and historians of art and architecture as an "*architecte maudit*," or "accursed architect," throughout the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, alternately dismissed, vilified, or taken as an inspiration by various architectural movements and critics, and acting as a veritable “bellwether” for architecture in modernity. All in all, the new expanded edition remains an invaluable introduction to Ledoux as an architect, practitioner, and theoretician in relation to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of late-eighteenth-century France. Within a concise format, Vidler has masterfully presented Ledoux’s practice and theory in their comprehensive breadth and depth, and illuminated the singular interrelationship they maintain between the real and the ideal which resists any simplistic reduction to utopianism.

Vidler’s enduring work has immensely enriched our understanding of Ledoux by situating him meticulously within his formative context and influences. Yet in no way, of course, can Ledoux be seen merely as a product of them. While Vidler recognizes Ledoux’s originality as an architect, he is more hesitant to recognize as much of a genuine, if not original, philosophical dimension to Ledoux’s architectural idealism as he does in others such as Étienne-Louis Boullée. As Daniel Rabreau has suggested, Ledoux’s ideas are often too quickly attributed to the influence of the figures he admired, such as Fénelon, Voltaire, and Rousseau. It could be argued that Ledoux merits consideration as an *architecte-philosophe* in his own right, capable not only of registering the philosophical questions and concerns of his time, but also of articulating them in the particular terms of architecture. While these and other questions remain yet to be fully explored, Anthony Vidler has laid the considerable groundwork for further understanding “a Ledoux still posing questions” not only to his own time, but also to architecture and urbanism in our own.

About the Author

Paul Holmquist, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at Louisiana State University, where he teaches architectural history, theory and design focusing on conceptions and experience of the public realm. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Architectural History and Theory from McGill University, and his dissertation examined Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s architectural theory in relation to the moral and political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Paul has taught at universities in the United States and Canada, and his research appears in *Chora 7: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture, 1960s-1990s*, *The Figure of Knowledge: Conditioning Architectural Theory, 1960s-1990s*, and *The Sound of Architecture: Acoustic Atmospheres in Place*.